

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Evidently, the very beautiful talent on show in the *Salomé* by Mr. Oscar Wilde is degraded by a total lack of personality. Mr. Oscar Wilde borrowed the majesty of his images from Leconte de Lisle, the pomp of his oration from Gustave Flaubert, the luxuriousness of his epithets from Théodore de Banville and he borrowed the remoteness of mystery under the splendid transparency of the Verb from Villiers de l'Isle Adam while he retains from Maurice Maeterlinck that manner, as if a little haggard and dazed, of saying several times the same thing, rambling and blathering on in a way that has always been facile and is becoming banal, of expressing uncertainty and fearful puerility (...) so now we are simply in the presence of a pastiche all the more visible and obvious because this little drama was written, by the author himself, in French.<sup>2</sup>

The words in which the symbolist drama of Oscar Wilde is described here, the day after the première in the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in Paris on the 11<sup>th</sup> February 1896, show Catulle Mendès taking exception against the elements of reprise and recuperation in the play. Ironically, the talent which is evident in this work would have resided in the skill with which Oscar Wilde built up his play with the genius of others. According to Mendès, *Salomé* would be a work without originality, in the manner of 'nothing new here'. Some thirty years later Mario Praz takes up the same points and, rather peevishly, goes much further. According to Praz, Wilde would have appropriated the emblematic value of the Femme Fatale<sup>3</sup> with which, by the end of the nineteenth century, the character of Salomé had been invested. Thus, his *Salomé* functions as a 'catalogue play' in which all the female characters of the fin de siècle who illustrate the themes of the Femme Fatale (Judith, Delilah, Eve and especially Salomé) are to be found. The synthesis of the characteristics of these themes (then fashionable), through various models, would explain the endurance of Wilde's *Salomé* to the test of time, in other words, its popularity<sup>4</sup>: the play would be representative for a whole epoch. 'The Salomé of Flaubert, Moreau, Laforgue and of Mallarmé are only known to scholarly and discerning people, but everybody knows the *Salomé* of that brilliant show-off called Wilde!' concludes Praz<sup>5</sup>.

Ever since the study of Praz, Wilde's *Salomé* has been systematically approached through the emblematic figure of the Femme Fatale.<sup>6</sup> However, since her (i.e. Wilde's) models are no longer recognised today, the discourse surrounding *Salomé* has clearly altered. Nobody reproaches the play

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Danielle Guérin who has provided me with data which I have used in this study.

<sup>2</sup> Catulle Mendès, *L'Art au théâtre*, II, Paris: Fasquelle 1896, p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Translated from Mario Praz, *La Chair, la mort et le diable. Le romantisme noir (The Romantic Agony)*, 1930). Traduit de l'italien par Constance Thompson Pasquali. Paris: Editions Denoël, 1977, p. 260.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, even though between 1900 and 1920 *Salomé* was not entirely popular, the play had nevertheless been translated into every European language, (including Yiddish), had been turned into and opera by Richard Strauss (in 1905) and by Antoine Mariotte (in 1908) and made into a film by Charles Bryant (in 1918). See the foreword by Robert Ross in Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*, London: The Bodley Head, 1930, III.

<sup>5</sup> Mario Praz, *op.cit.*, p.260.

<sup>6</sup> Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity, Fantasies of the Feminine Evil in the Fin-de-Siècle Culture*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, chapter 11. Mireille Dottin-Orsini, *Cette femme qu'ils disent fatale*. Paris: Grasset 1993, chapter 6. Rebecca Stott, *The Fabrication of the late Victorian Femme Fatale –The Kiss of Death*.

for having recycled other works in its composite nature. Even better, revived in the form of opera, ballet, film<sup>7</sup> and comic strip<sup>8</sup>, *Salomé* has, in her turn, been widely quoted and even recuperated and recycled<sup>9</sup> through the literature, theatre and cinema of the twentieth century and continues to do so in the twenty first. For example, last November the following announcement showed up on the site of ‘Tale of Tales’, a company which creates video games:

Salomé is a first century princess mentioned in the Christian Bible by Mathew and by Mark. But it is Oscar Wilde’s 19<sup>th</sup> century play ‘Salomé’ that has really inspired Fatale. In the Bible, Salomé is a child who dances for King Herod and asks the head of John the Baptist as a reward. In Wilde’s version, Salomé falls in love with the prophet. He rejects her and she has him executed. The play ends with her kissing the lips of his decapitated head.<sup>10</sup>

This is an advertisement announcing the launch of a game. The title, “Fatale: Exploring Salomé” associates ‘fatal’ and ‘tale’ with ‘to explore’ ‘Salomé’, making it clear that for the creators as well as for the players of this game the Salomé of Wilde is still emblematic of the Femme Fatale. On the other hand, the launch of the game on the birthday of the play’s first performance in England shows a change in the perception of the work which, more than a century after its creation, has lost the status of pastiche, having been replaced by that of model or even cult.

The impact of Wilde’s *Salomé* on the theatre, literature, imagery and on both popular and high brow culture in the twentieth century has time and again been put into perspective from Richard Ellmann<sup>11</sup> and Elaine Showalter<sup>12</sup> to Kerry Powell<sup>13</sup> through to Judith Butler<sup>14</sup> Richard Dellamora<sup>15</sup> or Alex Falzon<sup>16</sup>. As a post-modern play before its time, *Salomé* is part of the literary heritage, or even the ‘mythology’ of the West. Nevertheless, not a single study has, to my knowledge, looked at the elements of reprise or recuperation in its structure, in order to examine what they represent in particular, in general or systematically in their regrouping, and to study the way in which they contribute to the creation of meaning. Such a configuration in which the reprise becomes the model, contains a paradox: why is it that what has not survived in his models appears to be so durable in Wilde’s *Salomé*? Through a systematic examination of reprises and recuperations in *Salomé*, the

<sup>7</sup> William Tydeman, *Plays in Production: Oscar Wilde Salomé*. Cambridge University Press, 1996

<sup>8</sup> For example by David Shenton, London, Melbourne, New York: Quartet Books, 1986

<sup>9</sup> To make up a list of quotations, textual but especially visual, of Wilde’s *Salomé* would give enough material for a separate work. Let us say that certain episodes of the play, especially the dance and the kiss, have been parodied very frequently (amongst others in *Seed of Chucky*, a horror film of 2004 by Don Manchini).

<sup>10</sup> <http://tale-of-tales.com/Fatale/> consulted on the 9th November 2009.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Overtures to Salomé’, in *Golden Codgers, Biographical Speculations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974.

<sup>12</sup> *Sexual Anarchy: gender and culture at the fin de siècle*. New York: Viking, 1990.

<sup>13</sup> *Acting Wilde: Victorian Sexuality, Theatre and Oscar Wilde*. Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> *Gender Trouble*, London and New York: Routledge, 1990, and *Bodies that Matter*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Traversing the Feminine in Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé*’ in Thais E. Morgan, *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990.

<sup>16</sup> *Le Nozze Alchemiche di Salomè: Oscar Wilde e la tradizione ermetica*. Pisa: Pacini, 2007.

study which follows will endeavour to find answers to this question. The assumptions of Catulle Mendès and Mario Praz, according to whom this work is made up of reprises, will serve as a starting point. However, instead of confirming the lack of personality or the surplus of histrionics in Oscar Wilde, the following pages aim to put the reprised elements into context with the classical culture of the author. Transformed by inter-semiotic work, the recuperated elements reveal systematically the artificial nature of the characters and create a dialogue, or even a complicit understanding between the implicit author and the public. The philosophical concepts and esthetical principles the understanding relies upon, call into question the notion of gender.

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*Salomé* was written in French, a language Wilde mastered less well than English<sup>17</sup>. The reprises and recuperations would have mitigated, naturally, the relative command of French by the author.<sup>18</sup> They first appear in the shape of quotations,<sup>19</sup> but also in the non-discursive dramatic components demanded by the performance.<sup>20</sup> Let us start with the quotations.

These are taken from various sources: the Bible, patrology, a story, novel, essay or philosophical letter, a poem... on the one condition that they are written, (or translated) in 'authentic French' and that they appeal to the critical sense of the audience. Let us take as example of a quotation the first comment Iokanaan makes on Salomé:

"Who is this woman who is looking at me? I will not have her look at me. Wherefore doth she look at me with her golden eyes under her gilded eyelids? I know not who she is. I do not wish to know who she is. Bid her begone."<sup>21</sup>

These words align the title of a novel by Balzac, *La Fille aux Yeux d'Or*<sup>22</sup> and a phrase by Gautier describing the eponymous heroine of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* who, indeed, has gilded eyelids.<sup>23</sup> Taken from their narrative milieu and dropped into a dramatic dialogue, the juxtaposed phrases are also transposed images in the three-dimensional context of the stage. We move from one semiotic system to another, from the discursive linearity of the text to the coloured plasticity of volume which we imagine (or see) developing on the stage. Consequently the heroines of Balzac and

<sup>17</sup> Wilde's relative mastery of French is especially noticeable in the manuscript of the play. Cf. Oscar Wilde *Salomé*, Paris et Genève: PUF/Fondation Martin Bodmer, 2008, a facsimile copy of Wilde's first draft of the play.

<sup>18</sup> For someone who has a relative command of a foreign language, it is much 'easier' to make use of someone else's turn of phrase, feeling free to transform it, than to formulate a complex idea by trying to construct the right terms properly and artistically.

<sup>19</sup> Making a grammatical correction of an expression written in a foreign language is less sensible than using a quotation, whether in the original language or in translation.

<sup>20</sup> As for example the lighting which gives an active role to the moon, the dance of the seven veils, the necrophiliac kiss, the execution of Salomé etc.

<sup>21</sup> *Salomé*, translated into English by Lord Alfred Douglas, in *The Complete Stories, Plays and Poems of Oscar Wilde*, London: Michael O'Mara Books, 1990, p.537.

<sup>22</sup> *La Comédie humaine*, vol. 9, *Histoire des treize*, Paris: Furne, 1834.

<sup>23</sup> "des paupières dorées" T. Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835-6), Paris: Lemerre, 1891, t.l. p.10 and beyond.

Gautier find themselves ‘squeezed’ into the physical structure of Wilde’s heroine, leaving Iokanaan to guess their presence from the eyes of the one and the eyelids of the other. The prophet, whose function it is to recognise the truth of things, discerns in Salomé a superior being, capable of assuming the roles of both sexes, male and female, in common with the two heroines of the novels mentioned above. His speech has performing value (of the type ‘saying is doing’) because it intervenes in the definition of the identity of Salomé who from that moment on becomes, for the spectator as well, what Iokanaan has recognised in her.<sup>24</sup> Full of irony, this passage shows us a prophet who lies (‘I don’t know who this is’), who refuses to know (‘I don’t want to know. Tell her to go away’) although he not only has recognised the girl (‘the girl with the golden eyes’ etc.) but also has disclosed and forced his recognition of her on the audience by way of his performance. On a different level, the playwright also indicates through these recycled quotations that his prophet, (to go fast) knows his ‘classics’; he quotes Balzac and Gautier. Iokanaan, who is aware of the authority of his fictional status, moves in a conventional world where he assumes the role of a fabricated character. This is how Wilde kills two birds with one stone: the same recuperation which imposes Iokanaan as a reader of truths and defines the genetic nature of Salomé, also exposes the fabricated structure of the prophet – laying it bare.

Let us take a second example. To declare her love for Iokanaan, Salomé borrows her tone as well as her metaphorical turns of phrase from the *Song of Songs*<sup>25</sup>. She compares the body of Iokanaan to “the lilies of a field”, his hair to the “cedars of Lebanon”, his lips to “a band of scarlet on a tower of ivory”.<sup>26</sup> In their original context, the images recuperated by Salomé are used by a man to extol the beauty of his fiancée. In passing from poetry to the stage, the images call for an inversion from masculine to feminine with the same objective in sight as the recoveries from Balzac and Gautier: to act on the definition of gender of the two characters. The words of Salomé are also charged with performing power, which in her case however are more descriptive. Just as Iokanaan recognises in Salomé a superior being through her androgynous nature, so Salomé praises the feminine beauty which she recognises in the male body of the prophet who seems equally androgynous in her eyes. The characters who are explicitly opposed prove to be implicitly complementary and aware of their being complementary. Likewise, where Iokanaan presents himself as a reader of Balzac and Gautier, so Salomé announces herself as a ‘reader’ of the *Song of Songs* and, still by way of recuperation, also attracts the attention of the audience to the fabricated side of her character.

<sup>24</sup> For a definition of the notion of performativity see J.L.Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, Cambridge Ms: Harvard U.P., 1962

<sup>25</sup> For details of these borrowings, see my thesis, *Le Prétex de Salomé*, University of Paris 7, Dec. 1989, Vol. II, “Cantique des Cantiques: Iokanaan androgyne – un prophète et une princesse jumeaux”, pp. 401-402. See also Kerry Powell, *Acting Wilde*, Cambridge 2009, p.61.

<sup>26</sup> *Salomé*, p. 537-538 and *Song of Songs* 2, 1-2; 5, 15; and 4, 3-4

Recuperation can be more extensively developed than with just a straightforward turn of phrase. For example, it can be a sentence which nonetheless is never quoted word for word. Wilde preserves systematically the framework of the original, as far as expressions, the vocabulary and an echo of the original structure of the syntax are concerned. Not unlike a musician, he composes variations on the same theme. In that way, even if he ends up inversing the meaning of the reprised phrase, it remains nonetheless recognisable.<sup>27</sup> These types of reprised phrases are intercalated— one quotation can contain another one and the welded parts are, as one will see, organised around a common thematic base. They shed light on the play not so much by their proper meaning as by their original context. That is to say, the quotation itself will not make us understand the meaning of such and such a point as it occurs, but the original work from which the quotation was taken will do that.

Let us take as example a somewhat hermetic rejoinder<sup>28</sup> by Herod. Taken into account the treasure he secretly possesses and offers to Salomé in exchange for the life of the prophet, the tetrarch represents the artist at pains to create<sup>29</sup>. Made desperate by the obstinacy of Salomé, Herod blurts out the following sentence, sometimes considered – wrongly – as “a vague aphorism”<sup>30</sup>: “Il ne faut regarder ni les choses ni les personnes. Il ne faut regarder que dans les miroirs. Car les miroirs ne nous montrent que des masques.”<sup>31</sup> This is a reprise (with variations) of the phrase: “Il faut oster le masque aussi bien des choses, que des personnes”, which can be found in the 20<sup>th</sup> Essay of Montaigne.<sup>32</sup> Wilde retains the vocabulary, partially echoes the syntax but, improvising on the theme, ends up reversing the subject.<sup>33</sup> If we may compare the narrator of the *Essays* and Herod's statements,

<sup>27</sup> The identification of this type of recuperation depends on the culture of the spectator and his/her degree of participation in the interpretation of the work. One cannot recognise a quotation if one has no knowledge of the work from which it has been taken.

<sup>28</sup> Wilde inscribes this as dedication in the play's copy presented to Pierre Louÿs. It shows the importance of the quotation in his eyes.

<sup>29</sup> Like a retired writer who has failed to cut a dash, Herod derives a certain power from his secret treasures, from which only he can profit. His character is partly based on Pascal's "roi sans divertissement" ("A king is surrounded by people whose only thought is to divert him so that he might be kept from thinking about himself, because, king though he is, he becomes unhappy as soon as he thinks about himself." in *Les Pensées*, Fragment 168, IX, Divertissement) and partly on the model for the hero of *A Rebours* by Huysmans, Des Esseintes. See, Emmanuel Vernadakis, *Le prétexte de Salomé, pour une approche de l'oeuvre d'Oscar Wilde* (doctoral dissertation), Université de Paris VII, Dec. 1989, vol. 1, pp. 148-154.

<sup>30</sup> “Wilde, [imitating Maeterlinck ] also insisted [...] on vague aphorisms” : Pascal Aquien, “foreword”, Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*, Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1993, p.22-23.

<sup>31</sup> “Neither at things nor at people should one look. Only in mirrors should one look, for mirrors do but show us masks.” *Ibid.* 149-151.

<sup>32</sup> ‘One must remove the mask from objects as well as from persons’ (own translation) *Les Essais*, vol. I. Paris : PUF, 1975, XX, p.81. Wilde knew the works of Montaigne, which he mentions several times in *Intentions*.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Je croy à la verité que ce sont ses mines et appareils effroyables, dequoy nous l’entourons (i.e. la mort), qui nous font plus de peur qu’elle (...) Les enfans ont peur de leurs amis mesmes quand ils les voyent masquez; aussi avons nous. Il faut oster le masque aussi bien des choses, que de personnes. Osté qu’il sera, nous ne trouverons au dessous, que cette mesme mort, qu’un valet ou simple chambriere passerent dernièrement sans peur. Heureuse la mort qui oste le loisir aux apprests de tel equipage!’ Montaigne, *Les Essais*, vol. I, Paris: PUF, 1975, XX, p.81. (In reality I believe that what we are more afraid of than death are the frightening appearances and displays with which we surround it. (...) Children are afraid of their own friends when they see them with masks; so are we. We must remove the masks of things as well as of persons. Once removed, we will only find that same death underneath, which a footman or chambermaid passed lately without fear. Happy the death that removes permission to dress such an equipage! (My own translation).

then Montaigne wishes to remove the masks from persons and objects, whereas the tetrarch only wants to look at persons and objects wearing masks. The one says the opposite of the other. By revoking the context to its original milieu, the quotation of Montaigne sheds light, by *inverse* correspondence, on the position of Herod. The context of the two propositions is the same: man's fear of death.

According to Montaigne we are affected by the discourse, frightening as a mask, with which death is invested. If man could see things as they *really* are, death would frighten him no longer. Truth demystifies death, according to Montaigne. Herod is not searching for philosophical truth, unlike the author of the *Essays*. He is in search of beauty. Fathered by him, beauty will prolong his life on an aesthetic level and so allow him to defeat death (as do artists who leave behind them works of art). This concept is another of Wilde's variations on the theme of love, such as expounded in Socrates' speech in Plato's *Symposium* about the nature of Eros. The *Symposium* literally haunts *Salomé*<sup>34</sup> since its action takes place during another banquet called "Herod's Feast" by Wilde. Herod is convinced that the creation of beauty is an amorous act, thereby echoing the discourse of Diotima. According to the words of the latter, reported by Socrates, the love of two people consists of creating a third one, different from each of them but nevertheless extending them by forming a substitute of immortality in the bosom of earthly life itself. If the creation of a new being is not possible, as in the case with homosexual love, then love will find justification on a spiritual level by attempting to create beautiful discourses and virtues in the soul of the other.<sup>35</sup> Wilde's variation on this consists of replacing the identical gender of homosexual love with more complex genders, and the "beautiful discourses" with art. Still, Herod is preoccupied with the creation of beauty and, not achieving his objectives, watches the daughter of Herodias incessantly while accusing the latter of sterility. "Never has he spoken word against me, this prophet, save that I sinned in taking to wife the wife of my brother. It may be he is right. For, of a truth, you are sterile".<sup>36</sup> Herodias has not helped him to prolong his existence by giving concrete form to his vocation as creator. So Herod invariably feels the threat of death on his path whenever he looks for beauty. For example when he goes out on the terrace looking for Salomé he falls over the dead body of the captain of his guard. "I have looked too much at beauty, at death" Wilde makes him say in the *Austin MS*, the printed version of which has disappeared.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the twentieth essay by Montaigne creates a contrast between the philosopher who searches for truth and the artist who searches for beauty to illustrate two opposite attitudes in facing death: for the artist creation is a way to prolong life, a way to make death retreat; the philosopher, who is not afraid of death has, as far as he is concerned, no need to create.

<sup>34</sup> See Emmanuel Vernadakis, "Amour, mort et vérité dans *Salomé* d'Oscar Wilde" in *Palimpseste*, July-December, Héraklion, 1990 (p.109-120).

<sup>35</sup> Plato, *Le Banquet*, 206.

<sup>36</sup> *Salomé*, p.546

<sup>37</sup> E. Vernadakis, *Le Prétexte de Salomé*, *op. cit.* Annexe, p.54

The phrase by Montaigne which Wilde inverts and puts in the mouth of Herod has itself been rephrased by Montaigne from Seneca: 'It is not only from men, but also from things that the mask must be lifted',<sup>38</sup> writes Seneca in the twenty fourth letter to Lucilius in which he mentions the suicide of Socrates. Herod refers directly to Seneca<sup>39</sup> in the play and it is possible that his letter can also shed light on Salomé. Reality, according to Seneca, covers men and objects with a mask, making their real nature unrecognisable, even frightening. To arrive at the truth of things, they must be seen without their masks. The words of both Montaigne and Seneca were inspired by the philosophy of Plato. The two texts-sources make direct referrals: the twentieth Essay connects, by its title alone – "To practise philosophy is to learn how to die" with Pheadon, just as the twenty fourth letter by Seneca, who in the passage from which the quotation is taken comments on the refusal of Socrates to flee: "Socrates holds forth. Friends promise his escape. He refuses and stays in order to remove the fear of man for the two most dreaded words, death and prison".<sup>40</sup> This commentary, which is absent in Wilde's play, nevertheless explains the fear aroused in the executioner by the composure of Iokanaan in the face of death:

SALOMÉ *She leans over the cistern and listens:* There is no sound. I hear nothing. Why does he not cry out, this man? Ah! if any man sought to kill me, I would cry out, I would struggle. I would not suffer...Ah! Something has fallen upon the ground...It is the sword of the headsman. He is afraid, this slave! He has let his sword fall. He dare not kill him.<sup>41</sup>

The same commentary implicitly connects Iokanaan with Socrates. They have the same attitude towards death.<sup>42</sup> This implicit comparison shows also what separates the tetrarch from the prophet and what causes him to fear Iokanaan.

The recuperations whether in the form of short or extensive quotations, or with a textual or visual dominant, function as synecdoche: the recuperated part recalls the entire work from which it

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<sup>38</sup>But most of all remember to disregard the din which surrounds things, remember to see clearly what there is at the bottom of each thing. You will recognise that nothing very terrible is to be found there except for the fear one has of it. What you see happening to children also happens to us, big children that we are. The persons they love, with whom they are familiar, with whom they play, if these were to present themselves with a mask, the children would collapse with fear. We must remove the mask not only from humans but also from things, forcing them to resume their real faces. Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*, book III, letter 24. (own translation)

<sup>39</sup> In *Salomé* Herod refers directly to the suicide of Seneca.

HEROD: (...) I thought it was only the Roman philosophers who killed themselves. Is it not true Tigellinus that the philosophers at Rome kill themselves?

TIGELLINUS: There are some who kill themselves, sire. They are the Stoics. The Stoics are coarse people. They are ridiculous people. I myself regard them as perfectly ridiculous .

HEROD: I also. It is ridiculous to kill oneself.

TIGELLINUS: Everybody at Rome laughs at them. The emperor has written a satire against them. It is recited everywhere.

HEROD Ah! he has written a satire against them? Caesar is wonderful. He can do everything...

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> p.552

<sup>42</sup> Also worth noting is that this attitude leaves the confines of the play to shed light on the performance related commitment of the man Wilde, engaged writer-actor; because the situation described here by Seneca is not without similarities to the one Wilde had known between his first and second trial, when his friends had organised his flight to France and he refused to flee. This constitutes an example of conscious dramatisation with a moral engagement of the person Wilde.

has been taken. This is compressed by the author who only leaves a small portion of it visible-anticipating in some respects Hemingway's iceberg theory. The visible part can be a reflection, an echo or a variation of the model which sheds an indirect light on the structure of the plot or the characters. Plot and characters then appear as the result of a collage, an assembly or again as variations of an inferred theme. The creation of meaning entrusted to the viewer consists of the latter's setting the performed mental constructions based on the reprises against their original sources.

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I now wish to study Salomé's character through the dance and the kiss, two motives which will allow us to examine how the recuperations of a non-discursive nature function.

Salomé undergoes a searing dramatic development between the beginning and the end of the play. While she develops along a road paved with recuperations, she eventually increases from traditional standardness to aggressive gender related self definition, an axis that is, in itself, original. She enters the stage as an overtly fabricated character, made up of quotations and acts recognisable as identifiers of other literary or folkloric characters, whom biblical, mythological and literary traditions prevent her from being '*herself*'. However by the end of the play she manages to disengage herself from the weight of tradition just as she disengages herself from traditional gender (male and female). She achieves a new identity by defining herself according to her own idiosyncratic sexuality – her "*pleasure*". It will be argued that Salomé's performative self definition pertains to the tale through the motif of metamorphosis.

The admiration which Salomé showed in the beginning of the play for the moon turns her into a vestal. The legendary virginity of the moon-goddess Selene has been reprised here as an identifier leaving Salomé to define herself by way of an imagined mini-scenario: "...The moon is cold and chaste. I am sure she is a virgin. She has a virgin's beauty. Yes, she is a virgin. She has never abandoned herself to men, like the other goddesses."<sup>43</sup> This gender related identity which Salomé elaborates in a theatrical manner, as well as through identification, is radically altered from the moment the prophet takes notice of her and comments on her appearance. At the risk of being repetitive, Iokanaan recognises immediately the girl with the golden eyes and the gilded eyelids in her, as already mentioned. Then he sees her as the daughter of Eve: "Back! Daughter of Babylon! By woman came evil into the world"<sup>44</sup> he tells her in an allusion to the original sin. However, he also

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<sup>43</sup> "Séléné" in Pierre Grimal, *Dictionnaire de la Mythologie*, PUF, 1970, p. 418.

<sup>44</sup> *Salomé*, p. 538



calls Salomé “Daughter of Babylon.”<sup>45</sup> This concerns the reprise of another goddess, Ishtar, great enemy of Christianity, traces of whom figure in the *Apocalypse* <sup>46</sup>

The build-up of Salomé continues with the answer “Touch me not”<sup>47</sup> originally spoken by Christ to Mary-Magdalene and recuperated here by Iokanaan. He addresses these words to Salomé in order to attach the characteristics of sinner to the composite structure of the princess-dancer. The revealing gaze and the perform-related discourse of Iokanaan thereby constructs a powerful Salomé who combines fallen womanhood (Eve) and disquieting androgyny (the Girl with the Golden Eyes, Mademoiselle de Maupin) in the accursed body (daughter of Babylon) of a sinner (Mary-Magdalene). The portrait finishes with a recuperation turning Salomé also into a *traitress*. Iokanaan demands the execution of Salomé by crushing long before Herod gives the order: “Let the war captains (...) crush her beneath their shields”<sup>48</sup>, he says. The reprise behind this sentence, which also has a performing value (because it will be staged without being spoken again, at the very end of the play, where according to the stage directions, the soldiers crush Salomé under their shields) is again of a mythological nature. There is only one woman in mythology executed in this fashion; she is the person who has given her name to the Roman Golgotha, the Tarpeian rock, execution place for capital punishment.<sup>49</sup>

Intensified twofold by the impact of his voice which, as we know from the New Testament, is incomparable<sup>50</sup>, the gaze of Iokanaan influences our perception of Salomé and brings about a decisive change on her body as a vestal. The images and the ideology carried by that gaze and

<sup>45</sup> ? Salomé, p.537. The Babylonian goddess of fertility Ishtar, called Inanna by the Sumerians, went down into the underworld to look for her husband Dumuzi. At least this is the form by which her myth was known at the end of the nineteenth century, since the poem which tells the story of Ishtar descending into hell had only been partly restored. It was thought that the myth was a variation of the Orpheus and Eurydice one, with the male and female roles reversed. See for example the version offered by Gomez Carrillo in *L'Evangile de l'Amour* (1904), Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002. When Wilde was writing *Salomé* he met Carrillo every day. Consequently, the term “Daughter of Babylon” was for Wilde also charged with an ideology relative to the definition (meaning reversal) of gender.

<sup>46</sup> The following passage in the *Apocalypse* is identified as being a reference to Ishtar: “And I saw a woman seated on a scarlet animal, full of blasphemous names, having seven heads (...) dressed in purple and scarlet and adorned with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held in her hand a golden bowl filled with abominations and the impurities of her prostitution. On her brow a name was written, a mystery: Babylon the great, mother of lewdness and abominations of the earth”. *L'Apocalypse 17: 3-5*, and Barbara Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, San Francisco Harper and Row, 1983, 450-453 and Merlin Stone, *Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood: Our Goddess and Heroine Heritage*, (2 vols.) New York, New Sibylline Books, 1979, 105-111

<sup>47</sup> *Salomé*, p. 538 and John, XX, 17

<sup>48</sup> *Salomé*, p.544

<sup>49</sup> Tarpeia was the daughter of a guard of the Capitol stronghold who, out of love for the king of the Sabines, Titus Tatius, then at war with the Romans, betrayed her own people by delivering the stronghold to the enemy. After the battle, Titus Tatius gave the order to his soldiers to crush the traitress under their shields. Valerius Maximus, *Factorum dictorumque memorabilium*, 9, 6,1. Plutarch, *Vies parallèles*, Romulus, 17, Propertius, *Elégies*, IV.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. “A voice crying in the wilderness” Luke 3: 21.

that voice, both on the stage and within the mental theatre of the public, redefine the gender of Salomé so quickly that one can speak of a metamorphosis.

The theme of metamorphosis, analysed by Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1976), represents the profound changes a person must undergo on the journey from childhood to adulthood.<sup>51</sup> Salomé is a young girl who dances herself to full womanhood, becomes 'woman' -- or should I say "becomes herself"? -- and is immediately killed. Wilde uses the kiss in the final scene within the context of the theme of metamorphosis. In order to introduce the world of fairytales before perverting it, Wilde causes Herod to compare Salomé with Snow-White: "Salomé, come and eat fruit with me (...) Bite but a little of this fruit and then I will eat what is left". Contrary to Snow-White who ate half the apple offered her by the witch, Salomé answers: "I am not hungry, Tetrarch",<sup>52</sup> which however does not remove the metamorphosing power of the kiss, the latter serves in fairytales as antidote to inauspicious effects induced by apples or distaffs. We will come back to this also.

So far Salomé has been defined by textual reprises brought together through Iokanaan's repudiation and Herod's lust. Salomé stands like a figure made by a recuperation artist such as César, whose work, constructed out of heterogeneous scraps, is nevertheless welded into a solid, harmonious and strongly sexual whole.<sup>53</sup> This is especially so since the biblical, mythological and literary sources introduced by means of textual reprises serve non-discursive dramatic parts. Invented by Wilde, the "dance of the seven veils" mentioned in the stage directions does not feature in the dialogue. Nevertheless, since Salomé is identified by Iokanaan as the "Daughter of Babylon", the seven veils point to the descent into hell, as already mentioned. To ask Ereshkigal for the dead body of Tammouz, Ishtar stops at each of the seven doors of hell to take off one part of her ornaments,<sup>54</sup> which consist of the seven insignia,<sup>55</sup> to present herself naked before her sister the Queen of the underworld. Salomé removes her seven veils one by one in front of Herod so she can ask him for the head of Iokanaan. Again the original poem<sup>56</sup> informs the play more than the reprise. The nudity of

<sup>51</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1976), Random House, 2010.

<sup>52</sup> *Salomé*, p.541

<sup>53</sup> See for example "Centaure", Place Michel Debré, in Paris

<sup>54</sup> At any rate that was the version known to Wilde when writing the play. We should also take note of the component in Salomé that turns her into a courtesan: by removing her veils and presenting her nakedness to the tetrarch and the public Salomé recycles (always by inversion) the behaviour of Phryne, the hetaerae who stood model for Pheidias' Aphrodite of Knidos, the only sculpture of Venus without any veils. Accused of impiety, Phryne was acquitted thanks to the strategy of her defence lawyer, the orator Hypereides who, feeling he was going to lose the case, removed the veil covering the body of his client (and mistress) in order to carry the favour of the jury. *Le Deipnosophiste*, XIII, 59

<sup>55</sup> For an edition of the complete text of Ishtar's descent into hell see: *Poems of Heaven and Hell from Ancient Mesopotamia*, London: Penguin Classics, 1971, pp.135-165. One might compare the following verse: 'She took the signs in her hands, put the sandals on her feet, the seven insignia' (p. 136) and the reply of Salomé 'I am waiting for my slaves to bring me perfume, the seven veils and to remove my sandals'.

<sup>56</sup> *Inanna's Journey to Hell*, in N.K. Sandars (ed.) *Poems of Heaven and Hell from Ancient Mesopotamia*, London: Penguin, 1971.

Salomé becomes ambiguous in this double context shared by the myth and the play. Because the meaning of Salomé/Ishtar's nakedness is not the same in front of the lady of the underworld who is her sister and a woman, than in front of the tetrarch of Judea, who is a step-father and a man. To Ereshkigal and the reader of the ancient poem, Ishtar's nakedness represents the generative power of the female body and evokes sacredness; to Herod and the spectator of Wilde's play, Salomé's nakedness is a performance, a show which evokes wantonness and turns the princess into a courtesan. (cf. Mary-Magdalene and the 'daughter' of Babylon 'recognised' or constructed in her by Iokanaan.) Herod cannot imagine sacredness as part of the woman he sees in Salomé. Accordingly he treats her as a dancer and declares: "Ah, I pay the dancers well!"<sup>57</sup> And Salomé bows to the new definition, or at least for the time being. But when she asks for her 'dancer's wages' she specifies "I am asking for the head of Iokanaan *for my own pleasure*"<sup>58</sup> This principle of self-definition of Salomé is vital: all reprises and recuperations, indeed the whole play pivot around this theme.

To come to a final recuperation, the scene of the kiss associates blindness with silence to mark, paradoxically and ironically, the climax of the play. The slaves extinguish the torches. The stars disappear. A big cloud passes over the moon and hides it entirely. The scene becomes completely dark<sup>59</sup>. This is the moment in which Salomé ends Herod's banquet by "devouring" the mouth of the prophet. She enjoys the taste of the lips of the decapitated head in a scene of a primitive nature that Wilde prefers not to show us.<sup>60</sup>

Two other emblematic meals collate themselves by synecdoche to the banquet of Herod in order to amplify the power of metamorphosis of the kiss: the *Symposium* by Plato, already mentioned, and the Last Supper. In the context of the *Symposium* Salomé and Iokanaan are like the two halves, recognised but not united, of one of those beings cut into two on the order of Zeus, as mentioned by Aristophanes in his discourse, and who could have reconstituted their original completeness. As Catherine Clément among others has remarked, these characters are alike as if they were twins.<sup>61</sup> In fact we have already stated at the beginning of this article that both Iokanaan and Salomé recognise in the other their own sexual complexity. The context of Aristophanes' myth allows us to reconstitute the dramatic value of a miscarried anagnorisis (recognition): Iokanaan, who refuses to look at Salomé<sup>62</sup> and to unite with her, rejects the restitution of the original completeness and, with regards to the cosmic order implicated by that myth, defines himself as a traitor. Moreover, since Iokanaan is close to Socrates, as stated earlier, the meeting of the prophet and the princess sound like an echo of Alcibiades' rejection by the Greek philosopher, in the episode which, as we

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<sup>57</sup> *Salomé*, p.549

<sup>58</sup> *Salomé*, p.549

<sup>59</sup> *Salomé*, p.553

<sup>60</sup> A cloud passes over the moon so the scene takes place in the dark.

<sup>61</sup> Catherine Clément, 'Amour de Sainte', *L'avant scène opéra* (47-48) January-February 1983, *Salomé*, p.123

<sup>62</sup> IOKANAAN: 'I do not wish to look at thee. I will not look at thee' (p. 539) and SALOMÉ: Ah! Ah! Wherefore didst thou not look at me (...) If thou hadst looked at me thou hadst loved me.' (p.553)

know, closes the *Symposium* by Plato. This rejection feeds the desire and the spite of the kiss, increasing its transforming power brought about by the second banquet.

The Last Supper is called to mind by the words Salomé pronounces in the darkness after the kiss: “There was a bitter taste on thy lips. Was it the taste of blood...? But perchance it is the taste of love...”<sup>63</sup> The reference to the taste of love turns the kiss into a gothic parody of the communion where the wine offered by Christ to his disciples is trans-substantiated into the blood that is shed for the love of man.<sup>64</sup> At the moment of the kiss, the theme of metamorphosis reappears. By kissing the mouth of Iokanaan, Salomé represents the old world, the empire of Eros, of love as desire, as against agape, love as charity, purified of desire. The two loves, represented respectively by Salomé and Iokanaan could have functioned together, according to Wilde, like the complementary beings in the discourse of Aristophanes. This however, is not the case. Iokanaan, who was the pre-founder of Christianity, betrays the love as charity of Christ. Salomé in turn betrays her goddess Selene and her principles of chastity. So the kiss of Iokanaan and of Salomé seals the beginning of a sphere of betrayals, where the metamorphosis of Eros into agape passes through the execution of beauty and the death of the other.

The vampirisation of love by Christianity is deplored, in its turn, through the play of reprises. The lamentations of Salomé facing the decapitated head of Iokanaan finds an echo in the “lamentations of Isis” who weeps over the body parts of her brother-husband<sup>65</sup> and also in fragment 130 by Sappho of Lesbos concerning the bitter taste of love.<sup>66</sup>

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Reprise and recuperation in *Salomé* are part of a creative strategy which extenuates the relative mastery of Wilde’s French. Textual fragments and non-discursive images cross several semiotic systems and once organized, take root in an empty space within the text.<sup>67</sup> There they weave fragments of reflection articulated around gender and its relationship with love, creation and death. Decoded and placed end to end, these fragments denounce the coarse definition of gender since the beginning of our era. They make us go back (to paraphrase Mircea Eliade) “to the primordial time of

<sup>63</sup> Salomé, p.554

<sup>64</sup> Matthew XXVI, 28

<sup>65</sup> Salomé laments while facing the decapitated head of Iokanaan :”Ah, wherefore didst thou not look at me Iokanaan?(...)I saw thee Iokanaan and I loved thee. Oh, how I loved thee (...) (Salomé p.553) and Isis facing parts of the quartered body of her brother and husband:”Look at me (...) Do you not see me? I am searching for you to see you (...) and you do not hear my voice. Nobody else has loved you more than I” Gaston Maspero (éd. trad.), “Lamentations d’Isis et de Nephthys , d’après un manuscrit hiératique du Musée royal de Berlin (papyrus Berlin 3008)” (1866) dans *Recueil de Travaux* (vol. I-XV) Bibliothèque Orientale, Paris, 1882-93, t.XI 33.53.

<sup>66</sup> cf. “acre saveur”. However one must also resort to the English translation of the play to understand this recuperation: “There was a bitter taste on thy lips” This concerns the topos of “sweet and bitter” love an oxymoron of Sapphic origin cf. Fragment 130 by Sappho (glukuvpikron) used elsewhere by Wilde as a title for one of his poems, “Glykipikros eros”.

<sup>67</sup> As indicated by suspension dots and typographical blanks.

the beginnings,” to the origins of the History of the Christian world, when the founders of Christianity (re)defined Western man and his relationship with the other.

The conversion of the empty spaces into ideological matrixes and the silence into signs cannot be accomplished without the complicity of the audience. Their role is essential in the exploration and decoding of signs encrusted in the empty spaces, a process that could be defined as inter-medial performance-related transformation. As children descended from that historical moment, the spectators of *Salomé* inevitably know the ‘outcome’ of the history presented here. Wilde turns his spectators into witnesses, victims and judges of the events as told in his play. On several levels, *Salomé* functions as a work that is both modernist and post-modern before its time, by activating rather than just announcing the theatre of the next century. This theatre displays the reprises, recuperations and the “déjà vu” in a philosophical perspective which ties the individuality of the author and of the spectator together in a resolutely modern creation obstinately based on otherness.

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